

Remarks on the Situation in Iraq

August 7, 2014

Good evening. Today I authorized two operations in Iraq: targeted airstrikes to protect our American personnel and a humanitarian effort to help save thousands of Iraqi civilians who are trapped on a mountain without food and water and facing almost certain death. Let me explain the actions we're taking and why.

First, I said in June, as the terrorist group ISIL began an advance across Iraq, that the United States would be prepared to take targeted military action in Iraq if and when we determined that the situation required it. In recent days, these terrorists have continued to move across Iraq and have neared the city of Erbil, where American diplomats and civilians serve at our consulate and American military personnel advise Iraqi forces.

To stop the advance on Erbil, I've directed our military to take targeted strikes against ISIL terrorist convoys should they move toward the city. We intend to stay vigilant and take action if these terrorist forces threaten our personnel or facilities anywhere in Iraq, including our consulate in Erbil and our Embassy in Baghdad. We're also providing urgent assistance to Iraqi Government and Kurdish forces so they can more effectively wage the fight against ISIL.

Second, at the request of the Iraqi Government, we've begun operations to help save Iraqi civilians stranded on the mountain. As ISIL has marched across Iraq, it has waged a ruthless campaign against innocent Iraqis. And these terrorists have been especially barbaric towards religious minorities, including Christian and Yazidis, a small and ancient religious sect. Countless Iraqis have been displaced, and chilling reports describe ISIL militants rounding up families, conducting mass executions, and enslaving Yazidi women.

In recent days, Yazidi women, men, and children from the area of Sinjar have fled for their lives. And thousands—perhaps tens of thousands—are now hiding high up on the mountain, with little but the clothes on their backs. They're without food; they're without water. People are starving, and children are dying of thirst. Meanwhile, ISIL forces below have called for the systematic destruction of the entire Yazidi people, which would constitute genocide. So these innocent families are faced with a horrible choice: descend the mountain and be slaughtered or stay and slowly die of thirst and hunger.

Now, I've said before, the United States cannot and should not intervene every time there's a crisis in the world. So let me be clear about why we must act and act now. When we face a situation like we do on that mountain, with innocent people facing the prospect of violence on a horrific scale; when we have a mandate to help, in this case, a request from the Iraqi Government; and when we have the unique capabilities to help avert a massacre, then I believe the United States of America cannot turn a blind eye. We can act carefully and responsibly to prevent a potential act of genocide. That's what we're doing on that mountain.

I've therefore authorized targeted airstrikes, if necessary, to help forces in Iraq as they fight to break the siege of Mount Sinjar and protect the civilians trapped there. Already, American aircraft have begun conducting humanitarian airdrops of food and water to help these desperate men, women, and children survive. Earlier this week, one Iraqi in the area cried to the world, "There is no one coming to help." Well, today America is coming to help.

We're also consulting with other countries—and the United Nations—who have called for action to address this humanitarian crisis.

I know that many of you are rightly concerned about any American military action in Iraq, even limited strikes like these. I understand that. I ran for this office in part to end our war in Iraq and welcome our troops home, and that's what we've done. As Commander in Chief, I will not allow the United States to be dragged into fighting another war in Iraq. And so even as we support Iraqis as they take the fight to these terrorists, American combat troops will not be returning to fight in Iraq, because there is no American military solution to the larger crisis in Iraq. The only lasting solution is reconciliation among Iraqi communities and stronger Iraqi security forces.

However, we can and should support moderate forces who can bring stability to Iraq. So even as we carry out these two missions, we will continue to pursue a broader strategy that empowers Iraqis to confront this crisis. Iraqi leaders need to come together and forge a new Government that represents the legitimate interests of all Iraqis and that can fight back against the threats like ISIL. Iraqis have named a new President, a new Speaker of Parliament, and are seeking consensus on a new Prime Minister. This is the progress that needs to continue in order to reverse the momentum of the terrorists who prey on Iraq's divisions.

Once Iraq has a new Government, the United States will work with it and other countries in the region to provide increased support to deal with this humanitarian crisis and counterterrorism challenge. None of Iraq's neighbors have an interest in this terrible suffering or instability.

And so we'll continue to work with our friends and allies to help refugees get the shelter and food and water they so desperately need and to help Iraqis push back against ISIL. The several hundred American advisers that I ordered to Iraq will continue to assess what more we can do to help train, advise, and support Iraqi forces going forward. And just as I consulted Congress on the decisions I made today, we will continue to do so going forward.

My fellow Americans, the world is confronted by many challenges. And while America has never been able to right every wrong, America has made the world a more secure and prosperous place. And our leadership is necessary to underwrite the global security and prosperity that our children and our grandchildren will depend upon. We do so by adhering to a set of core principles: We do whatever is necessary to protect our people, we support our allies when they're in danger, we lead coalitions of countries to uphold international norms, and we strive to stay true to the fundamental values—the desire to live with basic freedom and dignity—that is common to human beings wherever they are. That's why people all over the world look to the United States of America to lead. And that's why we do.

So let me close by assuring you that there is no decision that I take more seriously than the use of military force. Over the last several years, we have brought the vast majority of our troops home from Iraq and Afghanistan. And I've been careful to resist calls to turn, time and again, to our military, because America has other tools in our arsenal than our military. We can also lead with the power of our diplomacy, our economy, and our ideals.

But when the lives of American citizens are at risk, we will take action. That's my responsibility as Commander in Chief. And when many thousands of innocent civilians are faced with the danger of being wiped out, and we have the capacity to do something about it, we will take action. That is our responsibility as Americans. That's a hallmark of American leadership. That's who we are.

So tonight we give thanks to our men and women in uniform, especially our brave pilots and crews over Iraq who are protecting our fellow Americans and saving the lives of so many men, women, and children that they will never meet. They represent American leadership at its best. As a nation, we should be proud of them and of our country's enduring commitment to uphold our own security and the dignity of our fellow human beings.

God bless our Armed Forces, and God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:30 p.m. in the State Dining Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to President Fuad Masum and Speaker of the Council of Representatives Salim al-Jabouri of Iraq. He also referred to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) insurgent organization.

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